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SUBJECT: PUTIN CONTINUES DRIVE TO MORE PALATABLE HISTORY
TEXTBOOKS

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11. (SBU) Summary: President Putin's effort to inculcate Russia's children with "national pride" via appropriately written history textbooks could bear fruit at the start of the 2008 school year. The campaign, which began in 2003 with the ban of a popular history textbook and a Kremlin call for a report on the "patriotic content" of history texts, is approaching implementation with two teachers manuals, on which textbooks will be based, due to be published soon. Dismay over the proposed treatment of the Soviet Union's darker chapters and continued disagreement about the legacy of the Yeltsin years is unlikely to derail the project. Even so, some contacts are skeptical that the Kremlin project can succeed in its aims. The debate demonstrates that, in academic circles at least, lively discussion and disagreement with the Kremlin are possible. End summary.

Creating "Proud" Russians

12. (U) The introduction of history and social science textbooks intended to foster a sense of patriotism in Russian students looks set to take place during the 2008 school year. The most recent effort to re-write Russia's history began in November 2003, when President Putin told a meeting of historians that textbooks were not the place for "ideological" struggle. The reference was to a popular history book written by historian and teacher Igor Dolutskiy, which challenged students to argue for and against propositions advanced in each chapter. One such proposition questioned whether contemporary Russia was a democracy. The Ministry of Education subsequently withdrew its approval of the Dolutskiy textbook. A report on the "patriotic content" of Russia's history textbooks was submitted in early 2004, which sparked a Kremlin call for new textbooks that would make Russian students proud and patriotic.

The First Contenders

13. (U) The initial results of the Kremlin's call were introduced at a conference for historians and teachers hosted by Putin on June 21 (the day before Moscow's first official commemoration of the start of the Great Patriotic War). At the conference, two new teachers manuals, still in the pilot stage, were presented: "The Newest History of Russia: 1945-2006" and "Social Sciences: The Global World of the 21st Century." The first, which is quite controversial among history teachers, offers a new spin on recent events and

promotes "sovereign democracy." More disturbing to many, it praises Stalin's leadership, especially his role in Russia's victory in the Great Patriotic War and his success in centralizing power. The author of the first is Aleksandr Filippov, a political scientist at the National Laboratory of Foreign Policy, a think tank associated with the Kremlin. Leonid Polyakov, a political science professor at the Higher School of Economics, edited the social science manual, about which there has been less discussion.

¶4. (SBU) (NOTE: Post has seen excerpts from the draft history manual. While acknowledging that Stalin is one of the more "contradictory" figures in Russian/Soviet history, Filippov argues that Stalin accomplished what the Soviet Union needed by fulfilling the Russian need for a tsar, by ensuring the economic buildup necessary to fend off Hitler's Germany, and by instituting a meritocracy. The manual argues that Stalin's pre-war purges rid the USSR of the Lenin-era generation of leaders, allowing "more competent" people to modernize the Soviet Union. The manual glosses over the Great Terror and the famine.)

Negative Response from Professionals

¶5. (SBU) In a July 17 conversation, Memorial's Irina Shcherbakova condemned the books, telling us that such interpretations bred cynicism, not patriotism. She thought that most Russians knew what happened under Stalin and that freedom of information in Russia was too great to allow the Kremlin a monopoly over interpreting history. She feared, however, that with the recent imposition of a unified state exam, "teaching to the test" would result in greater attention to the interpretations espoused in the texts. Shcherbakova said that she would continue to work with schools and teachers to see if changes could be made.

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¶6. (U) Academics have disagreed with many of the history manual's assertions. One contact observed, however, that it is not clear how large a role jealousy is playing in the outrage. As in other nations, textbook publication is a lucrative business.

¶7. (SBU) Some contacts were skeptical about the likely success of the Kremlin's strategy. Director of Moscow English School 1509 Tatyana Gumennik told us that, "with history constantly being re-written, teaching history has become a nightmare." She pointed out that teachers still govern their classrooms and that even if they are using recommended texts, much depends on how they present the material. Teachers, Gumennik said, were becoming tired of pilot projects and "innovative," but low-quality textbooks.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Russia's desire to improve history teaching is longstanding, as is the debate about the best way to teach its more painful chapters. Education Minister Andrey Fursenko, whose father is a renowned historian, has suggested that the topic be addressed at a 200th anniversary celebration of Russian-American diplomatic relations conference in November, which the Embassy is hosting with the Academy of Science's World History Institute and the Kennan Institute. Russia's search for a unifying ideology since the fall of the Soviet Union has been a perennial theme in politics, as seen most recently in Presidential Administration Deputy Head Vladislav Surkov's promotion of "sovereign democracy." Whatever version is adopted, the argument over Russia's Soviet-era and recent history will continue.

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